

Apocalypto

Many Christians are devoted to the idea of Apocalypse. A catastrophe ends this evil world and replaces it with perfect bliss. It's not that far removed from some of our own ideas of Messianism. It conveniently solves all the problems and relieves us of responsibility. So I wondered if Mel Gibson was going to follow his film about the end of one messiah with a film about a Second Coming. I confess I went to see the film *Apocalypto*. Why? The Talmud is rather keen on knowing what it is that one wishes to combat and even more keen on knowing how to answer one's critics. Besides, I was curious to see if I really could predict the unsavory Mr. Gibson's thinking. In a way it's a bit like being fascinated by the evil mind of a Holocaust denier. Is this a human or a freak? So I went despite my knowing that anything produced by him would be full of medieval flagellant blood, gore and sadism. And now that I've seen it, I would not recommend it at all to anyone.

There are some beautiful scenes of nature and plenty of repulsive anthropological shots of a primitive society with its barbaric humans and idolatrous hierarchies and superstitions. But the guts and gore of the film is yet another endless Hollywood chase in which the anachronistic hero, showing all the emotions of *Orange County*, despite being speared, arrowed, chopped, stabbed, cut and gored and losing enough blood to replenish a Baghdadi hospital's dwindling stocks, manages to run a marathon, evade a whole team of pursuers and, of course, rescue his wife and children. Even then, he survives only because his remaining chasers are amazed and flee at the sight of galleons from the Old World carrying the Christian barbarians who will replace the Mayan ones. Not surprisingly, our hero declines to trust them and therein lies the unusual twist at the end, because I was convinced that this was going to be another morality play in which Gibson's Medieval Catholicism would be shown to be superior to the cultures of the pagans. In truth, despite that twist, that is clearly what the message is, because the film starts off with a quote from the historian Will Durant about a society only being destroyed from without after it has destroyed itself from within. It was just that our hero was too primitive to make the right decision—a bit like the stubborn Jews don't you know!

The sad truth as we know it is that the medieval Old World was no more civilized than the medieval New World. It too burnt and killed human beings in the names of its gods. It too hanged, drew and quartered its enemies, ripping out the entrails of the living and dragging their half-dead bodies along the ground around the pretty medieval town squares. They, too, chopped off limbs and victimized women and enslaved men, women and children. And as society got richer and more technically proficient it simply found newer and more efficient ways of massacring its enemies, perceived or real. It may be true that some modern societies are far, far safer and better places to live in. It may be true that individuality is protected and encouraged. And it may be true that vast resources are committed to improving the quality of life and standard of living of the poorest levels of society. Nevertheless, even in the modern world, evil humans, tribes and gangs, torture, rape and kill in

the cruelest and most unspeakable ways and it matters hardly at all what continent or what stage the "civilization". Given the opportunity and the power, vast chunks of human nature sink to the lowest level and if "nurture" has changed, "nature" doesn't appear to have.

This would come as no surprise to the rabbis of two thousand years ago who asked why it was that the Bible describes the seed of Abraham as either the stars of heaven or the dust of the earth and replied that we human beings are capable of either rising to the stars or falling to the dirt. It is ideology that is capable of either elevating or destroying. What is the secret ingredient that differentiates the two?

There is, of course, the notion of Free Will, an elusive idea that neither Plato nor Aristotle managed to nail down, but which the Torah takes for granted. From Adam and Eve on, humans are shown choosing to disobey God. The Torah is neither a philosophical nor a scientific work and therefore makes no attempt to define the nature of choice. In our time, determinists, evolutionists and other "ists" all like to suggest there is no such thing. We are determined by our genes and our society, programmed like computers. In certain respects they are right, of course. The "accidents" of birth have a very powerful impact upon us, so too does or environment. I have no doubt that I am a rebellious maverick because my father was. That being born Jewish had something to do with my choice of religion and job, and that being born male has something to do with my choice of partner. But as we know this doesn't mean it always has to be. People do defy the expected either through accident or design. I know I have made mistakes I could have corrected or avoided, and we have all come across human beings who have changed their way of life, religion and ambitions against both odds and predictions. Clearly there is a "chip" in our brains that builds in unpredictability and changeability, more in some than others, just as some of us have poorer brains than others. Freedom does not necessarily mean there are no constraints at all. It does mean there are some areas where there is choice. Freedom of thought is a good example.

The genius of Judaism, and what distinguished it from paganism and earlier systems of law and worship, was its emphasis on the sanctity and the equality of human life **amongst those who shared those values** (to pre-empt the argument that we killed the Canaanites three and a half thousand years ago). No human life could ever be taken gratuitously, even in the protection of society at large. The much legislated death penalty was so hedged around with qualifications, limitation, and safeguard as to be virtually fictitious, no more than an abstract way of giving one a scale of priorities. "This is the sort of thing that symbolically deserves losing the gift of life." Whereas Hammurabi allowed one class to get away with murder against another within the same society, Biblical Law allowed for no such distinction.

The trouble with ideals and, indeed, religions is that they become subverted into systems that pursue power and control and when they do, they trample on individuals and individuality in the name of "the greater good". All primitive societies believed you could sacrifice the innocent to appease the gods (or torture the non-believers in the name of their gods). And what theistic religions did, humanistic religions whether led by Hitler, Stalin,

Mao, or Pol Pot took much further and did far greater harm.

In our day and age, the greatness of democracy lies not so much in the system itself or its ideals, but rather in the one simple fact that it allows for orderly change and the correction of mistakes. This can be achieved and is achieved peacefully, despite of course the efforts of politicians who seem primarily concerned with staying in power at all costs. In the Western world any party that stays in power for too long is always finally ejected, usually after about fifteen years. And I suggest the same thing happens with religions. Any exercise of power or imposition of constraints on thought will inevitably produce a reaction. Yet it is clear that democracy is not welcome in many parts precisely because it challenges religious authority.

Every society, every religion has its rituals and its laws and restrictions. Every society is at root primitive, superstitious, and gullible and grapples with unanswerable questions, the meaning of life and reasons for suffering. But only those societies that value and respect the humanity of their members deserve to survive. Those which impose unreasonable constraints, artificial conformity of thought, which in essence do not value human integrity, are bound to crumble or change, one way or another, regardless of Hollywood.

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